DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 311 SP 037 189

AUTHOR Oliver, Brad E.
TITLE Community Relationships: The Key to School Success. (An Interview with Elaine Griffin, National Teacher of the Year.)
PUB DATE 4 Oct 96
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-West Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, October 4, 1996).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Alaska Natives; *Awards; Beginning Teachers; Elementary Education; Elementary School Teachers; *Family School Relationship; Interviews; *Parent School Relationship; Rural Areas; *School Community Relationship; Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS *Alaska (Kodiak Island); Kodiak Island Borough School District AK; *Teacher of the Year

ABSTRACT

The 1995 National Teacher of the Year, Elaine Griffin, teaches on Kodiak Island, Alaska. Her experiences reinforce her belief in the importance of strong school-community ties and close relationships between teachers and families. Shared staffing in this remote rural environment has allowed the teachers time away for travel and other experiences. Griffin stresses the need for beginning teachers to understand the importance of the family and to show empathy for the family, thus strengthening the family unit at a time when its stability is threatened. This empathy also allows beginning teachers to understand what is meaningful in the life of their students and to show students how education can allow them to further those things that are already meaningful to them. Community relationships are most important in creating an unbreakable bond with each student, parent, and staff member based on mutual respect and admiration. When everyone in the community assumes responsibility for education, quality education based on partnership and mutual trust is possible. Successful schools require commitment to relationships with the community. (JLS)

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Running head: COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS: THE KEY

ED 405 311

Community Relationships: the Key to School Success

(An Interview with Elaine Griffin, National Teacher of the Year)

Brad E. Oliver

Ball State University

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Presented as a poster session at the 1996 Mid-West Educational Research Association annual meeting held in Chicago, Illinois, October 4, 1996.

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Abstract

At times, it is very rewarding to have opportunities to interact with individuals who exemplify the best in the field of education. Such an opportunity was recently afforded me, when I had the privilege of interviewing the 1995 National Teacher of the Year, Elaine Griffin, at Ball State University. Since 1951, the Council of Chief State School Officers in partnership with their corporate sponsor, Scholastic Incorporated, have selected an outstanding educator to serve as a spokesperson for education throughout the United States. Elaine Griffin is not only an outstanding educator, but a genuine ambassador of education and advocate for children. During my interview with Elaine, I had the opportunity to discuss a variety of educational issues, including cognitive research and current educational reforms occurring throughout the United States. This article attempts to summarize some of Elaine's responses to a series of questions posed to her during a videotaped interview.

Biographical Sketch

Elaine Griffin was born in upstate New York, but Elaine's adventuresome spirit had always longed for the frozen tundras of the Alaskan frontier. Elaine recalls the exact spot, in the Westfield Public Library of New York, where the Alaskan books were shelved. Although Alaska was always a childhood fascination for Elaine, the dream would not be a reality until she was an adult.

In 1974, Elaine was married and working as a librarian in Flagstaff, Arizona. She recalls viewing slides of Kodiak Island, Alaska with her husband, Ned (also a teacher), at a friends home. Immediately, Elaine's longing for the Alaskan wilderness was rekindled and within months, the Griffins had left Arizona for a two-teacher school in Akhiok, Alaska. The isolated, roadless village on the tundra of the southern tip of Kodiak Island provided the adventure Elaine had always desired.

Elaine's dream was not without a tremendous price. The community of Akhiok was plagued by alcoholism, teen pregnancy and suicide. Immediately, the Griffins found themselves working with the village advisory board to revamp the school program in hopes of diminishing the rampant sociological problems that persisted in this remote village. With great enthusiasm, Elaine implemented a demanding and culturally-relevant curriculum. Coupled with this curriculum, a statewide restructuring reform was undertaken to expand the school's program to include high school, which was nonexistent up until this time. Akhiok has realized the success of these initiatives by sustaining a high school graduation rate that has reached ninety percent. Elaine is quick to point out that the community has finally realized its own responsibility and power for making changes from within.
The community relationships established in this remote village would later provide the core of Elaine's message as the National Teacher of the Year.

Shared Staffing

In 1981, Elaine's Alaskan dream would carry her from the remote village of Akhiok, to the fishing community of Chiniak, also located on Kodiak Island. It was in Chiniak that Elaine first implemented her system of "shared staffing". Through shared staffing, Elaine and Ned have been able to alternate teaching responsibilities each semester with another teaching couple. The result has been the ability to provide stability and a variety of teaching styles to the thirty seven students who presently comprise the small school at Chiniak. An additional benefit has been the opportunity for Elaine to travel, teach, and volunteer in countries all over the world. These experiences have provided her students with a number of links to many communities around the world fulfilling Elaine's belief that "the whole world must be our community."

The shared staffing arrangement has been in place at Chiniak School for fifteen years. Elaine jokingly states that she and Ned share their district house, car, cat, and job with a another couple; and have at times considered sharing their children but have always stopped short of this. But on a more serious note, Elaine states that there are some distinct personal advantages to shared staffing. She elaborated that the semester each couple has off is spent touring the country and the world, providing an opportunity for each couple to leave the isolated tundra of Alaska and return months later excited and enthusiastic about sharing their adventurous excursions with the students of Kodiak Island. Elaine also cherishes having time with her family to enjoy hiking, reading, and interacting with her husband and children. When asked whether shared staffing was a feasible reality for other school corporations, Elaine stated that she had been able to find some research that demonstrated the ideals of shared staffing currently exist in a number of other forms. While Elaine is excited about the prospects of shared staffing

expanding to other educational settings, she notes that each community must review its needs and provide a staffing pattern that provides the greatest benefit to the children and community as a whole.

National Teacher of the Year

Elaine Griffin is a truly modest and humble human being. When conveying the story of how she became National Teacher of the Year, Elaine starts out with a disclaimer that "no one sets out to become the National Teacher of the Year."

Elaine recalls working in her classroom on a Sunday afternoon. She had been busy writing lesson plans when the telephone rang and a former student, who was serving on the Kodiak Island Teacher of the Year Search Committee, informed Elaine that she had been selected as the Kodiak Island Borough School Teacher of the Year. Elaine was very honored and deeply touched to have been given such an honor by the parents and students of her community, but she states that she never really gave any thought that this was only the beginning to an unbelievable adventure that would carry her to the Rose Garden of the White House.

Shortly after receiving this honor, Elaine filled out her fifteen page application for Alaska Teacher of the Year, but believed that her experience as a village teacher would eliminate her chance of being selected. As such, Elaine was not only shocked, but had real doubts whether she could fulfill the role of being the State Teacher of the Year, after being informed of this tremendous honor.

The application process continued and shortly thereafter, Elaine Griffin was notified that she would be recognized by President Bill Clinton as the next National Teacher of the Year for 1995. Elaine was immediately flooded with feelings of tremendous honor, but also an incredible sense of responsibility as she realized she was about to represent a nation full of outstanding educators. Tentative about her abilities to complete the task, Elaine began her reign as National Teacher of the Year.

Responses to Interview Questions

For the past year, Elaine Griffin has traveled throughout the United States visiting schools and institutions of higher education. She has been fortunate to witness first hand the present state and future of education. During her visit to Ball State University, doctoral student Teresa Finkbine and myself had an opportunity to conduct a videotaped interview with Elaine (E. B. Griffin, personal communication, March 1996) posing a diverse number of educational questions. The following paragraphs attempt to summarize the highlights of Elaine's responses to those questions.

Being able to travel extensively this past year has allowed Elaine to witness a variety of educational reforms. When asked about current educational trends, Elaine prefaced her remarks by stating, "We are lucky to live in a time when there is so much cognitive research that guides us in the science of teaching." According to Elaine, this research has provided strategies that can help students retain information. It has provided strategies for learning essential life skills that can be used as they enter adulthood. But most importantly, Elaine has seen many examples of schools that practice a cohesive philosophy that combines the information gathering aspects of education with the skill development portions of education to create a student who is capable of being a life long learner. Through such educational reforms, the student is not only an individual life long learner, but is also an active participant of the community. Elaine views this as an essential ingredient to educational success, as education can form the foundation of community in a school that will serve as a model for the type of community needed by society in the future. Some examples of educational reform efforts that are working to achieve this goal are: block scheduling, looping, multi-grade classrooms, advocate teachers at the high school level (who progress with a student throughout

their high school career), and community services provided through the school creating essential links with the community. These essential links allow education to become seamless, making education a part of the students real life and not just a fragmer ted stop on this journey through life.

Another area of discussion was the advice Elaine would offer to beginning teachers. Elaine believes that the greatest advice she can give aspiring educators is to learn that the family operates as a unit. It is Elaine's belief that if beginning teachers can grasp this concept, they will have an easier time of forming lasting bonds with their students. There is a need to be empathetic in regards to being able to accept every student and their family. By showing empathy for a student and their family, the beginning teacher can easily work through the complex problems that threaten the fabric of stability in the home. Furthermore, empathy will allow the beginning teacher to understand what is meaningful in the life of their students, and show them how education can allow them to further those things that are already meaningful to them.

To the future administrator, Elaine emphasizes that they must realize that they are the individual that brings all the strands of school life together. The administrator is the individual responsible for taking all the pieces of the puzzle and carefully working those pieces into a completed picture of success. Elaine cites the example of a female administrator who utilizes staff development to carry on Socratic discussions with her staff. This young principal urges her staff to "listen to one another." To make this time more meaningful, the staff is encouraged to read books, such as, Deborah Myer's The Power of Their Ideas, where a large urban school in Harlem, New York divides its student population into smaller units to create a stronger sense of community. The book is then used as a catalyst to discuss how teachers might be able to have empathy for one another and for their students.

The discussion generated by the interview with Elaine led us to explore the role of higher education in terms of ensuring future educational success. Elaine was adamant about the need to create experiences for aspiring educators that are reflective of those experiences we desire for them to be able to create in the classroom. These beginning teachers need to be able to carry the same emotional charge from these experiences into their classrooms as future educators. For example, if a goal of higher education is to create a teacher capable of building a sense of community in the classroom, then the beginning teacher must experience a community of their own as they complete their undergraduate course work. By creating such a community, the beginning teacher is capable of realizing the need to work cooperatively with her peers to solve problems and discover solutions. Elaine also feels that it is essential for institutions of higher education to identify outstanding educators in the community to be paired with beginning teachers, not only for the experience of observing, but for participating with that outstanding teacher in a classroom environment.

When asked about the most significant highlight of being the National Teacher of the Year, Elaine enthusiastically replied that it was being able to meet teachers who have crossed the gap between their dreams and the obstacles that kept them from their dreams. She recalled the first time she met all fifty State Teachers of the Year in Washington D.C. Elaine explains that each teacher was asked to introduce themselves in a three to four sentence synopsis that illustrated something they had accomplished in their teaching career. The experience of hearing so many individuals talk about overcoming all types of adversity to achieve their dream, has solidified her belief that no dream is impossible. Elaine states that as she travels, her encouragement to educators and administrators alike is that they can overcome adversity through determination and an expectation for success.

An Aleut Basket Weaving

While Elaine had much to say regarding the present state of education and the future of education, I was unforgettably convicted by her remarks regarding our need as educators to build a sense of community in our students. Elaine explained that education makes it possible to take the images of our culture and the images from our own lives, and weave these together with the images of our neighbor to create a democratic society. She described the importance of community relationships in creating an unbreakable bond with each student, parent, and staff member based on mutual respect and admiration. Elaine stated that, "...our school is a community and a family. We are all essential collaborators in this enterprise called Education."

To animate the importance of community relationships to the success of schools, Elaine uses an Aleut basket weaving as an object lesson. She describes in great detail how the long grassy blades of the tundra (used to weave the basket) are representative of parents, businesses, advisory councils, school boards, etc. that make up the "threads" of education. She continues to explain that when all of these threads are woven together, they form a durable fabric that encircles the student and ensures that we provide our children with every possible experience in an effort to make them productive and successful adults. When everyone in the community assumes this responsibility for our children, a quality education based on partnership and mutual trust is provided in our schools. The end result is a graduating body of students that possess the capacity to cooperatively solve the ever present challenges of our society.

Conclusion

It was indeed a pleasure to spend time with Elaine Griffin. Her genuine concern for education was evidenced by her desire to see strong schools formed

through strong communities. Let us never forget that our schools are a direct reflection of our community. If we desire successful schools, than we must be committed to building those relationships in our communities that are imperative to our schools' success.

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Author Note

Brad E. Oliver, Educational Leadership Department (graduate student); Ball State University.

The author of this paper would like to acknowledge his appreciation to Teresa Finkbine, graduate student, Educational Leadership Department, Ball State University for her contributions during the interview with Elaine Griffin. The author would also like to thank Dr. Terry Wiedmer, Educational Leadership Department, Ball State University. It was a tremendous privilege to work with both Ms. Finkbine and Dr. Wiedmer on this project. Finally, the author would like to thank Elaine Griffin, 1995 National Teacher of the Year and Jon Quam, Executive Director of the National Teacher of the Year Program, Washington, D.C. It was a privilege to meet and work with both of you.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Brad E. Oliver, 1471 South 16th St., Noblesville, Indiana 46060. Electronic mail may be sent via Internet to beoliver@iquest.net.